THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE EVOLUTION OF TOURISM IN 2020 IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

Abstract. The article sets out, based on statistical data, how the Covid-19 pandemic has severely affected and continues to affect tourism worldwide, including in the Republic of Moldova. States are making considerable efforts to resume travel. Among the conditions for the resumption of international travel is the vaccination against COVID-19. Although the return of tourism to the indicators in 2019 is expected for 2024, the traditional economic model of travel organizers is to be considerably revised.

Keywords: tourism; COVID-19; support; vaccination; economic model.

The pandemic caused by the Covid-19 virus has severely affected economic activity around the world. The tourism industry is one of the most affected sectors, registering in 2020 a global decrease of over 72% of international arrivals [1].

According to French publications, the turnover of tour operators in France, which is one of the largest tourist destinations in Europe, decreased in 2020 by 86% [2].

The tourism industry in the Republic of Moldova was also severely affected, registering a decrease of 75-80%.

Thus, the number of foreign citizens who visited the Republic of Moldova in 2020 decreased by 3.21 million people compared to 2019 [3], which is a decrease of about 70% (table no. 1).
Table no. 1

Statistical data on the crossing of the state border by foreign citizens in 2019-2020, admissions, million people

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The year</th>
<th>2019</th>
<th>2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In total, millions of people</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a percentage of the previous year</td>
<td>+6.2%</td>
<td>-70%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source. Developed by the author based on data from the National Bureau of Statistics.

The number of tourists in the tourist accommodation structures decreased in 2020 by 75.9% compared to the previous year, or by 284.5 thousand people [4]. The worst affected was the incoming tourism, which decreased by 83.5% (table no. 2). Less, but still significantly, the number of local tourists decreased, by 139.1 thousand people, or by 69.3%. An analysis of the distribution of the number of tourists by types of accommodation structures showed that in 2020 they suffered the least from tourist and agritourism pensions, which registered a decrease of about 7%.

Table no. 2

The number of tourists in the tourist accommodations in the years 2019-2020, thousands of people

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The year</th>
<th>2019</th>
<th>2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreign tourists</td>
<td>174,0</td>
<td>28,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a percentage of the previous year</td>
<td>+10.9%</td>
<td>-83.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local tourists</td>
<td>200,7</td>
<td>61,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a percentage of the previous year</td>
<td>-1.8%</td>
<td>-69.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of tourists</td>
<td>374,8</td>
<td>90,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a percentage of the previous year</td>
<td>+2.8%</td>
<td>-75.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source. Developed by the author based on data from the National Bureau of Statistics.

Travel agencies also suffered considerable losses. Thus, the number of tourists and hikers who traveled through travel agencies and tour operators in 2020 decreased by about 252 thousand people, compared to 2019, which is a decrease of about 67% (table no. 3) [5].

The outbound tourism suffered the most, registering a decrease of 76%.

At the same time, the negative impact of the pandemic generated a decrease of only 7% in the number of tourists in domestic tourism.
Table no. 3

Number of tourists and hikers who traveled through travel agencies and tour operators in the years 2019 - 2020, persons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2019</th>
<th>2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Domestic tourism</td>
<td>46,128</td>
<td>42,848</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a percentage of the previous year</td>
<td>+ 14,9%</td>
<td>- 7,2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outgoing tourism</td>
<td>310,649</td>
<td>74,708</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a percentage of the previous year</td>
<td>+ 17,6%</td>
<td>- 76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incoming tourism</td>
<td>19,848</td>
<td>6,950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a percentage of the previous year</td>
<td>+ 2,9%</td>
<td>- 65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>376,625</td>
<td>124,506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a percentage of the previous year</td>
<td>+ 16,4%</td>
<td>- 67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source. Developed by the author based on data from the National Bureau of Statistics.

The volume of revenues from the activity of travel agencies and tour operators has also decreased considerably [5].

Compared to 2019, the volume of revenues decreased by 1.72 million lei, registering a decrease of about 69% (table no. 4).

Table no. 4

The volume of revenues from the activity of travel agencies in 2019-2020, billion lei

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2019</th>
<th>2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total, billion lei</td>
<td>2,5</td>
<td>0,78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a percentage of the previous year</td>
<td>+ 38,9%</td>
<td>- 68,8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source. Developed by the author based on data from the National Bureau of Statistics.

Some surveys indicate that about 25% of economic agents (travel agents) stopped working in 2020.

Some tour operators and travel agents have also reduced the number of employees from 20% to 50%.

In order to support the business environment in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the state authorities, together with the specialized associations, carried out a number of activities designed to provide tangible support on several dimensions:

– supporting the sector in its efforts to adjust legislation to minimize the impact of COVID-19;

– connecting the Republic of Moldova to the international tourism space
through online promotion activities and rallies to the activities launched by the World Tourism Organization;

– supporting the associative environment and the providers of tourist services through information sessions, debates and dissemination of good international practices regarding the sanitary protocols;

– systemic actions to relaunch domestic tourism.

Among the activities of informational support of economic agents in the tourism industry and dissemination of good practices during the pandemic period are:

– publication and dissemination by direct mailing of the WHO Guide for Accommodation and Hotel Chains “Operational instructions for the administration of COVID-19 in hotels and accommodation”;

– conducting the survey of outbound tourism agents "Outbound Tourism - COVID-19" in order to assess losses due to restrictions and solutions suggested by the sector, on extending the repayment period for canceled holiday packages and the possibility of offering alternative destination options holidays, other than in the package purchased;

– promoting the Guide with general recommendations for economic agents developed by the World Tourism Organization and the World Health Organization for overcoming the crisis generated by COVID-19 and reducing risks;

– organizing Export Morning sessions, addressing issues related to tourism.

It should be mentioned that, in support of broadcasting tourism, Law no. 72/2020 on some measures to support travelers and economic agents in the tourism industry to mitigate the negative effects generated by the epidemiological situation (COVID-19), which amended the deadline for refunds in case of termination of tourism services contracts [6].

Thus, Law no. 72/2020 stipulates that, by derogation from the provisions of the Civil Code of the Republic of Moldova no. 1107/2002, of Law no. 105/2003 on consumer protection and the applicable contractual clauses, in the case of contracts for travel service packages concluded until 17 March 2020, if the traveler is entitled to a refund of payments made as a result of the termination of the contract or
otherwise, the organizer or another professional is obliged to return the respective payments to the traveler no later than December 31, 2021.

Globally, among the conditions for the resumption of international travel are the measures not to spread the COVID-19 virus, among the most relevant being:

– vaccination against COVID-19 and presentation of the vaccination certificate;
– presentation of the anticovid test;
– presentation of the certificate on the presence of antibodies against COVID-19 in the body;
– other measures, depending on the country of arrival.

According to the World Tourism Organization, it is assumed that, given the size of the tourism value chain and its proven ability to be a sector of opportunity for all, the effects of vaccination campaigns and the resumption of tourism will far outweigh the simple economic consequences.

Thus, according to a report by the European Commission for Tourism, travelers are already returning to Europe due to a high vaccination rate against Covid-19, but the tourism industry is far from returning to the figures for 2019, ie before the pandemic [7]. International customers are returning, but very slowly. Thus, despite a strong summer comeback, by the end of 2021, international tourist arrivals in Europe should be 60% lower than in 2019. Among the countries that are doing well, it is worth mentioning Greece, which benefited from a spectacular return in the summer season, the overnight stays of tourists being down by only 19% compared to 2019 [8].

However, the return to normal is expected only from 2024.

At the same time, it should be noted that vaccination efforts will not be sufficient to allow a complete resumption of activity. The traditional economic model of travel organizers, based on the mass and advance sale of transport tickets and accommodation in tourist reception facilities, risks not being able to withstand the pandemic crisis. Although they are familiar with the upheavals - between climate hazards, geopolitical tensions and the emergence of new competitors on the Internet, as a result of which tour operators have lost customers over the years, low-cost
flights and digitization of travel services intervene with corrections in organizing travel activities. In order to be able to operate in the future, tour operators should offer customers more flexibility in travel services, considerably reducing the time of programming and marketing of travel packages [2].

Conclusions.
2. The tourism industry in the Republic of Moldova registered in 2020 a decrease of 75-80% compared to 2019.
3. Tourism needed and received assistance from state authorities.
4. Among the conditions for the resumption of international travel is the approach against covid.
5. The return of tourism to the indicators from 2019 is expected for 2024.
6. The traditional economic model of travel organizers is to be considerably revised.

References:
2. The article “Tour operators affected by the pandemic must reinvent themselves”, Le Figaro, 27.01.2021.
6. Law no. 72/2020 on some measures to support travelers and economic agents in the tourism industry to mitigate the negative effects generated by the epidemiological situation (COVID-19). https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?document_status=0&tip%5B%5D=39351&nr_doc